

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 796

CG 016 262

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TITLE The Name Game: Community Response to Counselor Names.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (Detroit, MI, March 17-20, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Counselor Characteristics; *Counselor Client Relationship; *Counselors; Higher Education; Psychological Studies; *Responses; Sex Differences; Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS *Name Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Numerous studies on the effects of common and unusual names reveal contradictory findings. Some studies conclude that an unusual first name or surname is detrimental to a person's self-concept; other studies conclude that an unusual first name, especially if it is a surname, cause no ill-effects on a person's psychological well-being. College students (N=79) participated in a study of the impact of male therapists' first names and surnames on potential clients. Students evaluated selected "most appropriate" and "least appropriate" first names that were paired with "most appropriate" and "least appropriate" surnames. Results showed the name combinations most favorably evaluated were "most appropriate" first name paired with "most appropriate" surname. Male and female differed in their ratings. Socialization patterns may play some part in the favorable or unfavorable perception of names. The counselors' important job of presenting themselves to their communities may become easier if they develop an awareness of the effect their names may have on clients. (Author/PAS)

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The Name Game: Community Response
to Counselor Names

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The Name Game: Community Response to Counselor Names

Over the years, there have been numerous studies on the effects of common and unusual names. Some researchers (e.g. Eagelson, 1946; Hartman, Nicolay, and Hurley, 1968, and Marcus, 1976) have reported that either an unusual first name or surname may be detrimental to a person's self concept and/or functioning. Other researchers (e.g. Gladding and Farrar, 1982; Zweigenhaft, 1977; and Zweigenhaft, Hayes, and Haagen, 1980) have determined that an unusual first name, especially if it is a surname, may be looked upon favorably and have no ill effects on a person's psychological well being. Zweigenhaft (1977) has pointed out that there is a difference in the way unusual names have been determined in various studies. Zweigenhaft (1977) has also emphasized that there are cultural, racial, and ethnic differences within the United States on what is considered to be a common and unusual name. These differences have made research in this area difficult.

Yet, names do tend to be one of the variables by which an individual is first evaluated. Gladding and Farrar (1982) found that certain male and female first names were perceived by psychology students as either "fitting" or "not fitting" a professional helpers' role, i.e. being "most appropriate" or "least appropriate." There was a difference in the preference of names by gender, with males being more positive about the names overall. A limitation of this study was that only first names were studied. Gladding (1982) also studied surnames to evaluate how appropriate such names of actual therapists were rated.

In order to investigate the impact of first names and surnames of therapists on potential clients, the present study was conducted.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 79 introductory psychology students. They were almost equally divided according to gender, males (N=40), females (N=39).

Instrument

The instrument used for this study was a rank order scale. Students were asked to evaluate from first choice, ranked number 1, to last choice, ranked number 6, six male first names paired with six surnames. Students were told that the names they were ranking were actual names of counselors. They were to rank the names without knowing anything else about the counselor, much the same way they would do if they moved to a new community and had to select a therapist from the yellow pages of the phone book. All of the six male first names had been evaluated previously as being either "most appropriate" or "least appropriate" names for therapists (Gladding and Farrar, 1982). Half were in each category. The six surnames had been evaluated in a similar fashion (Gladding, 1982). The "most appropriate" first names were: "Mason", "Meyer", and "Edgar." The "least appropriate" first names were: "Leo", "Fritz", and "Alvin." "Most appropriate" surnames were: "Childs", "Starr", and "Wise." "Least appropriate" surnames were: "Anger", "Reckless", and "Stump."

The names were paired in four combinations of: (1) "most

appropriate" first name with "most appropriate" surname, e.g. "Mason Childs", (2) "most appropriate" first name with "least appropriate" surname, e.g. "Mason Anger", (3) "least appropriate" first name with "most appropriate" surname, e.g. "Fritz Childs", and (4) "least appropriate" surname, e.g. "Fritz Childs", and (4) "least appropriate" first name with "least appropriate" surname, e.g. "Leo Anger." Only male first names were used because of a previous finding (Gladding and Farrar, 1982) that students identified these names more clearly than females names with helping professionals, e.g. psychiatrists, perhaps because of the dominance of males in these professions. The names were arranged randomly according to the four previous combinations described so that students would not be influenced by the order in which the names were presented.

Procedure

Students were divided into two groups and tested at the beginning of a regular class session. They were instructed to rank the names according to their first impressions and to assume that all the named therapists were equally qualified.

Group 1 (N=35) was presented name pairs that were either both "most appropriate", e.g. "Mason Childs", or both "least appropriate", e.g. "Leo Anger." Group 2 (N=44) were given mixed paired names of "most appropriate" first name with "least appropriate" surname, e.g. "Mason Anger", or a "least appropriate" first name with a "most appropriate" surname, e.g. "Fritz Childs." The two groups were considered to be basically equal in background.

Results

As expected, the counselor name combination that was ranked highest matched a "most appropriate" first name with a "most appropriate" surname. "Edgar Wise" ($\bar{X}=2.39$, S.D.=1.56) was ranked first overall. However, the next two most often highly ranked names were those that matched a "least appropriate" first name with a "most appropriate" surname, i.e. "Leo Wise" ($\bar{X}=2.44$, S.D.=1.68) and "Alvin Starr" ($\bar{X}=2.45$, S.D.=1.48). These were followed by "most appropriate" first name and surname combinations, i.e. "Mason Childs" ($\bar{X}=2.75$, S.D.=.98) and "Meyer Starr" ($\bar{X}=2.78$, S.D.=1.40).

 Insert Table I here

The lowest ranked name was one that paired two "least appropriate" names together, i.e. "Fritz Reckless" ($\bar{X}=5.00$, S.D.=.62). This ranking was closely followed by a combination of "most appropriate" first name with a "least appropriate" surname, i.e. "Meyer Reckless" ($\bar{X}=4.80$, S.D.=1.33). In both cases, the surname "Reckless" appears to have been the most influential variable. The next two lowest ranked name combination both contained the surname "Anger." The "most appropriate" first name "Mason" when paired with "Anger" was ranked only slightly ahead of the "least appropriate" first name "Leo" when it was paired with "Anger" ($\bar{X}=4.30$, S.D.=1.35 vs $\bar{X}=4.33$, S.D.=1.66).

When the name combinations were evaluated according to gender, males and females differed. The most highly ranked name combination for males matched a "most appropriate" first name with a "most appropriate" surname, i.e. "Edgar Wise" ($\bar{X}=1.90$). However, while females also ranked a "most appropriate" first name and surname the highest, their choice was "Mason Childs" ($\bar{X}=2.14$). For both males and females, name combinations with the "least appropriate" surname "Reckless" were rated lowest. Females ranked "Fritz Reckless" the lowest ($\bar{X}=5.07$), while males ranked "Meyer Reckless" lowest ($\bar{X}=4.95$). Other high or low rated names, for both males and females, appear to have been most influenced by the "appropriateness" of the surname.

 Insert Table 2 here

Discussion

Two results of this study seem especially important. First, the influence of a "most appropriate" first name when paired with a "most appropriate" or "least appropriate" surname appears to have only a small effect on overall name ranking. While it should be noted that 3 of the top 5 ranked name combinations contained "most appropriate" first name and surname combinations, the "appropriateness" of the surname appears to have been the major influencing factor. All of the top 6 ranked name combinations contained "most appropriate" surnames, while all of the 6 least favored name combinations contained a

"least appropriate" surname. Thus, in evaluating the name of a counselor, a "least appropriate" first name was offset if the surname was considered "most appropriate."

A second related factor is the observation from the results of this study that certain surnames are considered more "appropriate" with males and others with females. Although this study contained only 6 surnames, it is interesting to observe that the most highly ranked surname for males, regardless of its first name pairing, was "Wise." The most highly ranked surname for females, although apparently influenced by its first name pairing, was "Childs." Socialization patterns may play some part in the favorable or unfavorable perception of names. Certainly more investigation into this area is called for.

Conclusion

The results of this study support earlier investigations on the importance of a name on the influence of a person's life (Zweigenhaft, 1977). A person's personal, as well as professional, life may be effected by that person's first and last name combination. It should be emphasized that a name combination is only one factor among others (e.g. appearance, intelligence) that may effect the person's life. Yet, it may provide an initial impression of the person, especially in the person's absence.

The name combinations considered in this study were both limited in range and scope and should not be generalized outside the population studied. Yet, the implications within this research are that a perceived "most appropriate" last name for a

counselor may offset a "least appropriate" first name, while the reverse may not be true. Also, as found in an earlier study (Gladding and Farrar, 1982) males and females differ in their favorable or unfavorable impression of specific names. More investigations into this area, using real clients instead of psychology students would appear to be most helpful. The community where counselors practice may have an impression of a specific counselor through the person's name before he/she meets with a client. That impression may either be an asset or a handicap. An awareness of this information may facilitate the job of counselors in presenting themselves to their communities.

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Table 1

"Most Appropriate"* and "Least Appropriate"** First Names
and Surnames Rankings of Therapists According
to Combination Variations and Groups

Group 1 (N=35)				Group 2 (N=44)			
Name	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Name	Mean	S.D.	Rank
1. Leo Anger	4.33	1.66	5	1. Mason Anger	4.30	1.35	5
2. Mason Childs	2.75	.98	2	2. Fritz Childs	3.07	1.37	3
3. Fritz Reckless	5.00	.62	6	3. Meyer Reckless	4.80	1.33	6
4. Meyer Starr	2.78	1.40	3	4. Alvin Starr	2.45	1.48	2
5. Alvin Stump	3.75	1.14	4	5. Edgar Stump	4.07	.66	4
6. Edgar Wise	2.39	1.56	1	6. Leo Wise	2.44	1.68	1

* "Most Appropriate" First Names¹

1. Mason
2. Meyer
3. Edgar

* "Most Appropriate" Surnames²

1. Childs
2. Starr
3. Wise

** "Least Appropriate" First Names¹

1. Leo
2. Fritz
3. Alvin

** "Least Appropriate" Surnames²

1. Anger
2. Reckless
3. Stump

¹Gladding, S.T. and Farrar, M.K. Perceptions of common and unusual first names of therapists. Psychological Reports, 1982, 50, 595-601

²Gladding, S.T. Perceptions of therapists' surnames. Unpublished research study, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT., 1982.

Table 2

"Most Appropriate"* and "Least Appropriate"** First Names
and Surnames Rankings of Therapists According to
Combination Variation and Gender

Group 1 (N=35)					Group 2 (N=44)				
Name	Male (N=21)		Female (N=14)		Name	Male (N=19)		Female (N=25)	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank		Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1. Leo Anger	4.62	5	4.00	5	1. Mason	4.00	4	4.34	5
2. Mason Childs	3.05	3	2.14	1	2. Fritz Childs	3.32	3	2.83	3
3. Fritz Reckless	4.90	6	5.07	6	3. Meyer Reckless	4.95	6	4.69	6
4. Meyer Starr	2.71	2	2.93	2	4. Alvin Starr	2.32	2	2.71	2
5. Alvin Stump	4.29	4	3.64	4	5. Edgar Stump	4.16	5	4.03	4
6. Edgar Wise	1.90	1	3.21	3	6. Leo Wise	2.26	1	2.54	1

* "Most Appropriate" First Names¹

1. Mason
2. Meyer
3. Edgar

* "Most Appropriate" Surnames²

1. Childs
2. Starr
3. Wise

** "Least Appropriate" First Names¹

1. Leo
2. Fritz
3. Alvin

** "Least Appropriate" Surnames²

1. Anger
2. Reckless
3. Stump

¹Gladding, S.T. and Farrar, M.K. Perceptions of common and unusual first names of therapists. Psychological Reports, 1982, 50, 595-601.

²Gladding, S.T. Perceptions of therapists' surnames. Unpublished research study, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT., 1982.